

Thinking About:

Computer cataloguing databases

Overview

Cataloguing databases, generically known as collection management software, help you document and monitor your collection.

Limitations of computer cataloguing systems

Using a cataloguing database is time-consuming and requires people skilled in data entry and backup work. The initial transference of information is also time-consuming.

Some small museums have implemented short-term projects using volunteers or tech-savvy students to get the system up and running. It's important to ensure the volunteer involved in this project has the skills and knowledge to train other members of the group before the conclusion of the project. Having a system no one can use is of no help in managing the collection.

A cataloguing database is completely dependent on the information that is entered into it. Accuracy is crucial—if the information entered contains spelling mistakes or different rules are followed by different users, this affects the validity of your search and your ability to interpret information, e.g. if 'chair' is spelt incorrectly as 'chiar' in an entry, the chiar will not appear in your search.

Advantages of cataloguing databases

Ease

The information is:

- Easily retrievable – provides easy searching for location, condition and provenance of an object.
- Easily added to and updated – provides a cumulative research and record-keeping tool.
- Readily accessible – all records are kept together in one computer file which can be synchronised across several computers for multiple access.

Searchability

Fast retrieval of information, eg: if you are looking for information on 'chairs' in a furniture collection, it won't just give a list of chairs with a cross reference to the card, it will provide all information on all chairs in the collection.

Indexing

Provides a global picture of your collection. If duplicates exist, such as 5 copies War and Peace, a cataloguing database will retrieve this kind of information quickly before accepting a gift of another copy.

Space

A computerised cataloguing database removes the need for card files, although hard copies of catalogue records and object files in your collection still need to be maintained.

Locations

Locations of objects can be easily monitored whether they are in storage, on display or on loan to another organisation and provides fast retrieval of this information.

Safety

Saving the database to an external hard drive (one kept separately from the main computer) allows for a copy to be stored off site in case of a disaster. This is good disaster preparedness.

Types of databases

Off-the-shelf databases

There are many computer cataloguing databases available in varying price ranges. Some are developed specifically for museum and gallery information and others are for generic purposes. M&G NSW recommends choosing a database specifically for cultural collections. These are ready to load onto the computer and start entering information into.

Each brand of software is made with different types of users in mind. Some are made for volunteers to use in remote parts of the country and others are targeted at professional museum staff with computer experience and training. Price is not necessarily indicative of suitability to your needs.

For more detailed information about specific brands of cataloguing databases, see our Collection Management Systems Fact Sheet.

mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-management/collection-management-systems/

Many off-the-shelf cataloguing databases have pre-set fields for information that can only be modified in small ways. This may mean changing the forms or records in use in the museum or gallery. Be aware of the implications of having to transfer information to a computerised system and plan for it across your paper-based record keeping. Researching multiple options ensures you can select a database that is most compatible with the existing cataloguing procedures.

Do-it-yourself databases

M&G NSW recommends the purchase of a proprietary brand database to catalogue your collection. However, if you have Microsoft Access or FileMaker Pro on your existing computer, you can create a simple database yourself. Replicate the existing catalogue forms or cards used by the museum to create the fields in your database. Both Access and FileMaker Pro have the capability to export the information to an Excel spreadsheet, which means you can transfer the data to an off the shelf database in the future. If you are not confident creating a database, or if you are considering purchasing a database in the future, work in Excel rather than trying to develop your own database.



You might also like ...

Cataloguing Fact Sheet, M&G NSW

mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-management/cataloguing/

Important questions to ask

What type of computer do you have?

Is it a PC compatible computer or a Mac? This will affect the types of program you can run on it. Some cataloguing databases can only run on one type of platform.

How new is your computer? How much 'memory' space does it have?

If your computer is more than five years old it may not have enough processing power or memory to run the program you are considering. Consult with the software provider and your computer specialist before buying.

Do you have trained people to use the program?

Ensure there are training opportunities and support mechanisms (some collection management software comes with online support forums and training packages) for people who will be using the software program. If no one can use the computer program it will have little or no information in it, and not work to its full potential.

Who should have access?

Do you want to restrict access to a few people? Or it may appropriate to have a system open to all staff? Just as long as file back-up is the responsibility of one staff member.

What is your budget?

Are you aware that M&G NSW can fund up to \$2,000 to purchase Collection Management Software? See the VM Small Grants Guidelines for eligibility details.

What other capabilities do you want the system to have?

Do you want the software to record object condition and locations as well as basic information about the object? Consider how the catalogue software presents the information for printing. Will you need to connect it to a printer or a scanner or both?

What are the highlights, strengths, capabilities and weaknesses of the chosen software?

Ask the product providers many of which offers 30 day free trials. Download a system for trial and test it with a small sample of your collection. If you choose to apply for a VIM Small Grant to cover the cost of purchase, it will strengthen your application if you have tried at least one database before choosing which you want to buy.

What type of support does the company provide?

Support packages are available in different forms—some companies offer phone support; others provide an online forum where you can register a question; others provide comprehensive archives of frequently asked questions. To ensure people in your organisation are proficient and confident in using the database it may be worthwhile buying one of these support packages for ongoing care.